Rules: The dos and don'ts of online engagement

In a 2017 report, Nesta investigated best practice in 'digital democracy'. Many of the principles of this relate directly to online engagement. Below are some of the key dos and don'ts to emerge from their report, as well as that from guidance elsewhere.

✓ **Do** think about why you're engaging online. Stakeholders must always see that their participation in the process had a purpose and could affect the eventual outcome. There's nothing worse than online engagement for its own sake, so think about why you've chosen online channels.

✓ **Do** be clear about how you're using findings, and how they feed in directly. Online channels can feel impersonal and pointless if people don't hear back – even more so than other types of engagement. So, follow-up is especially important.

✓ **Do** make sure you get the balance right, and deploy traditional approaches as well as online platforms. Be clear about why you have struck the balance you have. The big suspicion among residents will be that digitisation dehumanises engagement, so be flexible, and make use of offline engagement methods where it's needed. Encourage staff to respond flexibly – even if this means sometimes picking up the phone.

✓ **Do** engage citizens directly in the co-production of digital platforms, during your pre-engagement phase. This can stop online engagement projects from becoming 'white elephants'.

✓ **Do** think in advance about how to to 'design out' destructive participation and tackle disrespectful behaviour. This is often especially important with online engagement, where the anonymous nature of the medium can result in disruptive contributions.

✓ **Do** try to create a culture where staff and councillors are equipped and encouraged to engage digitally and to innovate. This can help avoid overly formulaic approaches, which go against the core ethos of digital technology, and can breed cynicism.

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✗ **Don't** waste time by designing online channels before you have spoken to people. Get buy-in from decision-makers early on. This improves chances of success, increasing public participation and improving institutional take-up.

✗ **Don't** cut corners. For online engagement to work, it needs to be well-resourced. This means having the right staff and equipment to deliver the product online and analyse its results – as well as the resources to provide offline support. Digital democracy is not just a quick or cheap fix.

✗ **Don't** let it become all about you. Choose tools designed for the users you want; platforms which make the process easily accessible, and which try to raise the quality of the debate.

✗ **Don't** let digital channel be a box to tick. Paying lip service to a new technology will look half-hearted and clumsy at best, and disingenuous at worst.